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AUTHOR Strasheim, Lorraine A.
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ABSTRACT

Interest in foreign language education is growing rapidly, linked to increased concern about international trade and international relations and a general interest in educational quality. The foreign language profession in the 1980s is committed to the development of proficiency-oriented curricula and instruction and the production of proficient students. The challenge of doing this is not as difficult as it may seem at first. What is needed is a realignment of instructional priorities rather than acquisition of new teaching behaviors. Teachers have been devoting most of their instructional time to structure-based activities, one of the reasons that error correction and emphasis on form have become a problem. Instruction should balance mechanical drills and language-use activities, with equal focus on form and message. In addition, the processes of language learning and language acquisition must be balanced in the classroom. Methodological eclecticism can be valuable if the strategic plan is dynamic and is constantly being monitored and improved upon. Classroom teachers will have to continue to experiment to bring classroom practice in harmony with language teaching goals and principles. (MSE)

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# 3 Proficiency in the "Real World" of the Professional Classroom Teacher

Lorraine A. Strasheim
Indiana University

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## Change Changes—One More Time

These are heady times in foreign language education in the United States. Although foreign languages have historically been elective in American schools, state departments of education/public instruction and school districts across the country are beginning to require some language study of some or all students. Schools that have never offered foreign languages are adding them to their curricula. Existing programs are being expanded to include Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. Enrollments are up, despite the decline in the total student population, and attrition rates are edging downward. Yet less than ten years ago, teachers were turning to eclectic teaching approaches in what was to become a decade of "innovative overchoice" (Lafayette, 13) as they fought to arrest plummeting enrollment and escalating attrition rates.

Even more amazing is the fact that the acquisition of second-language skills—as late as the seventies deemed a "frill" or fit study for only the college-bound—is being linked to the capabilities of the United States to retain its leadership role in world affairs and to stabilize its economy through more culturally enlightened international trade. And it is not just foreign language teachers doing the linking! As Hoegl (9, pp. 282–83) has indicated,

> International trade now accounts for 25 percent of our gross national product. Forty percent of U.S. farmland produces for export, and 20 percent of

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U.S. industrial output is sold abroad. Altogether one in five Americans depends on international trade for employment.

One critical lesson American foreign language teachers have learned in this century is that policy is very much dictated by world events. Two World Wars, Sputnik and the space race, and now global interdependence have dramatically altered the course of second-language education in this country. *Keeping informed on national and world events is as much a part of our professional preparation as in-service workshops.*

## Is the "Impossible Dream" Coming True?

The most recent changes in foreign language education have been engendered as much by forces outside the profession as by those within it. The thrust toward excellence in education stimulated by a series of national assessments of schooling in the 1980s has certainly been a major factor, for it has captured first the media, then public attention.

The earliest of these assessments was contributed by the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies in 1979 (22). Entitled *Strength through Wisdom*, the Commission's report stressed the need for young Americans who could "communicate with our neighbors in their own languages and cultural contexts" (p. 28) and the need for establishment of standards of proficiency. As a direct result of the Commission's recommendations, *The ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines* (3) emerged in the fall of 1982. The *Guidelines*, which are not tied to levels of instruction, described proficiency levels in five areas: speaking, listening, reading, writing, and culture. The first step toward a "proficiency movement" has been taken. The biggest contribution these *Guidelines* made was to raise the profession's consciousness and to focus attention on the concept—and the issue—of proficiency.

By mid 1983 a series of national assessments of schooling favoring extended sequences of study and the attainment of proficiency were thrust upon the public consciousness by the media. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, for example, conceding in *A Nation at Risk* (17, pp. 25–26) that "achieving proficiency in a foreign language

ordinarily requires from four to six years of study," goes on to say that it is desirable that students achieve such proficiency because study of a foreign language introduces students to non–English-speaking cultures, heightens awareness and comprehension of one's native tongue and serves the Nation's needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense, and education." To a great extent, *A Nation at Risk* established the rationale for foreign language study in the 1980s and beyond. It is important to note the priorities set in the ordering of the benefits of second-language learning.

While many of the assessments supported foreign language study, none, until December of 1983, made any effort to define the role of second languages in the curricula of the schools. In that month, the National Advisory Board on International Education Programs declared foreign language a "basic," a feat teachers had been unable to achieve during the "Back to Basics" movement. In a report commissioned by the U.S. Secretary of Education (16, p. 2) the Board took the position that

> An emerging consensus places the study of foreign languages and cultures alongside the five "basics" of English, mathematics, computer science, social studies, and the natural sciences as fundamental components of a sound education.

It therefore becomes clear that teachers, in their earlier endeavors, forgot that there were "new basics" and that these included "far greater understanding of the peoples on this planet" (Lafayette and Strasheim, 14, p. 30). "Foreign languages and cultures" will make the "impossible dream" come true. That is borne out in the phrase coined by the College Board, "proficiency in another language and culture" (1, p. 28).

## "Proficiency": The Buzzword and the Reality

"Proficiency" is *the* buzzword of the 1980s. And, like many a buzzword before it, "proficiency" is the signal of an idea whose time has come, for the "movement" toward proficiency began mid-century during the "audiolingual revolution" when the profession began to focus on skills development and deep culture. The foreign language profession in the 1980s *is* committed to the development of "proficiency-oriented" curriculum and instruction and to the production of

"proficient" students—that is, students who are able "to function effectively in the language in real-life contexts" (Liskin-Gasparro, 15, p. 12). If the curricula, instruction, and *students* do not materialize, the public support, which interprets "real-life contexts" to mean "cultural contexts" will disappear with the speed of light.

The challenge to classroom teachers is not as difficult as it may seem at first glance, for what is needed is much more a matter of realigning priorities than of acquiring new behaviors. The profession learned an enormous amount in the decade of "innovative overchoice" (Lafayette, 13) just past, and, as Liskin-Gasparro (15, p. 40) has pointed out, "Our understanding of how language is acquired has never been greater, and textbooks, for all we may complain about their imperfections, have never been better." What we need to do, as Krashen (12, p. 53) has contended, is "to allow . . . theory, applied research, and teachers' ideas to contribute to practice and to enrich each other." *All foreign language teachers in the "real world" of the classroom, as a matter of personal and professional policy, are going to have to strive for synthesis and integration—and to demand synthesis and integration of the leadership.* As Finocchiaro (6, p. 6) so wisely advised us, "There should never be an either/or decision about educational or linguistic theories or strategies."

## Designing Proficiency-Oriented Curricula

Byrnes (4, p. 128) argues that as teachers become proficiency-oriented they will tend to see "language not only as form but also as function, not only as product but also as process, and as a creative, interactive task performance rather than as an uncontextualized set of linguistic behaviors." This is fine as far as it goes, but any curriculum designed for the real world of the classroom must be directed toward the concept of "proficiency in language and culture" (1, p. 28). *The ACTFL Guidelines* (2), as they emerged in 1986, do not serve the "real world." *"Proficiency in language and culture" is what the national assessments of schooling were really calling for, what humanities education demands, and the only concept that will, in all likelihood, motivate a significant number of students to remain in the sequence long enough to attain meaningful levels of proficiency.*[1] Although the words "motivation" and

"retention" are rare in the emergent literature on proficiency, they represent critical issues in the "real world." Only about half of the foreign language teacher population teaches a single language or a single discipline full-time (Lafayette and Strasheim, 14). Half of the student population is in level one, and 8 percent or more in levels one and two.

An equally compelling reason for focusing on the concept of "proficiency in language and culture" has been advanced by Crawford-Lange and Lange (5, p. 172) who argue that

> the integration of language and culture is even a more powerful organizing principle for foreign-language education than is language proficiency, because that integration is prerequisite to true language competence.

Without the integration of language and culture, that "active, spontaneous *use* of language and productive cultural interaction" of which Higgs speaks will never come to pass (8, p. v).

Although past efforts at curriculum design "have been handicapped by having to make do with a fuzzy, if at times elegant, itinerary toward a vaguely specified destination," as Heilenman and Kaplan have charged (7, p. 59), the reason teachers have not defined "performances" stems from our failure in academe to determine the purposes for which we are training our students. Our Foreign Service Institute and Interagency Language Roundtable mentors have specific positions for which their students are being prepared. But what can academe offer the learner who invests several years in acquiring second-language skills beyond developing the capacity to discuss himself or herself ever more fully and in ever more complex terms? When the Indiana Task Force (28, p. ix) faced this issue, it was determined that we are training the young people in Hoosier schools:

- To become culturally sensitive and communicatively competent travelers, students, and/or workers in other societies and cultures in the world,
- To interact positively and more effectively with the native speakers they meet and work with in this country, and
- To evolve more of those capabilities needed for productive citizenship in Indiana, the United States, and the world.

"Performances" arise out of the situations, not the speech functions, a student the age we are teaching might encounter in the "real life" context of the culture or cultures that speak the language. This cultural "backdrop" gives students vicarious experiences rather than merely language exercises in which they "translate" themselves into another code. There is an enormous difference between "skits" and role-playing. Students really do believe that "language is the medium, culture is the message" (Strasheim, 27). If they did not, our promotional and recruitment strategies would not work at all.

Once the purposes for learning the language have been established, teachers can go on to define those "language proficiency achievement goals for the end of each year of study at all levels, with special attention to speaking proficiency" called for by the President's Commission (22, p. 42). They can define "performances" in terms of what student travelers can comprehend aurally, say, read, or write in a cultural context.[2] It matters not one whit whether these "language proficiency achievement goals" are called "learning outcomes," "performances," "functions," "communicative competencies," or "proficiencies"; what does matter is that the curriculum will be defined in terms of the "active, spontaneous use of language and productive cultural interaction" (Higgs, 8, p. v) of which the student is expected to be capable and the means of providing "global evaluation . . . in various skill areas" (Heilenman and Kaplan, 7, p. 59). In defining "language proficiency achievement goals" in this way, teachers will also be establishing what "proficiency" is to be attained at each successive level in the sequence. This kind of approach, due to the "cycling" or expansion of performances from level to level, will help students to mark their progress in ways unknown before. What is critical in this type of goal setting, however, is a point made by Schaefer (23, p. 13):

> However modest the goal, it must be clearly stated and must be met, without compromise and without exception: Above all, it must be meaningful, must ensure that the student can use the language to the extent that it provides some degree of self-satisfaction. That is not too much to ask, but in the final analysis, it is everything.

This approach to orienting the curriculum toward proficiency is

very much in keeping with three of Omaggio's (20, p. 51) five hypotheses for the proficiency-oriented classroom:

- Opportunities must be provided for students to practice using the language in a range of contexts likely to be encountered in the target culture.
- Opportunities should be provided for students to carry out a range of functions (task universals) likely to be necessary for interacting in the target language and culture.
- Cultural understanding must be promoted in various ways so that students are prepared to understand, accept, and live harmoniously in the target language community.

The curriculum guide defined in terms of learning outcomes or "language proficiency achievement goals" will not merely be a document to be sent to the administration and then stashed in a desk drawer or a filing cabinet. *The student-performance-oriented curriculum guide will be a constantly used "map" toward the twenty or so goals students must achieve in moving toward that clearly specified "proficiency," which is the destination for that level of instruction.*

## Realigning Our Instructional Priorities

Ironically, students *do* learn what they are taught, and what they have been taught, as Heilenman and Kaplan (7, p. 58) point out, has not led to proficiency:

> Learning a certain number of objectives along with their morphological changes does not translate directly into being able to describe, just as learning the various uses and forms of the subjunctive is not the same thing as being able to defend one's opinions and state one's feelings. . . . The stated goal of such programs, language use, has not been met because the real goal, in terms of what students were expected to do, pertained primarily to form rather than to function and was more concerned with complete sentences than with discourse-level competence.

The plain fact of the matter is that teachers have devoted 80 to 85 percent of their instructional time to structure-based activities. In addition to the time expended on grammar explanations, oral mechanical

drills, and correcting written homework exercises, speaking activities and reading-comprehension questions have also focused on the structures employed. Even small groups or pairs, when they are used at all, have been utilized more often than not for drilling rather than for interactive language-use activities. As Jeffries (11, p. 1) makes clear, however, the proficiency-oriented or

> communicative classroom is *about communication*, not just language. It is as much about giving orders as it is about the imperative form. It is as much about gesture, intonation, and context as it is about sentence structure or vocabulary. It is not only *how* to say it, but also when and why and what to expect in reply.

One of the real reasons error correction has become such a problem is that it pervades almost every moment of every class meeting because almost every minute is spent attending to form. As Stevick (25, p. 28) has indicated, "The question about maintaining accuracy is not 'whether'; it is 'when' and 'how'." Although guides like *Error Correction Techniques for the Foreign Language Classroom* (Walz, 30) are extremely useful, the real issues are the need to develop greater equity in the amount of class time spent on mechanical practices and that spent on language-use activities and that corrections should occur in "skill-getting" but not in "skill-using."[4] There is probably no other discipline in the curricula of the schools where error correction is so intensive and so extensive. While parents praise and foster language use in children acquiring their native language, foreign language teachers tend to "pick" and "nag." Our focus on error correction and form may well be a contributing factor in the fact that the real "terminal 2" is level two in the sequence.

One way to assure that language-use activities get "equal time" is to follow up on one of the practices of Suggestopedia: schedule the communicative activities early in the period. But while this type of scheduling is helpful, we also have to redefine our concepts of what language-use activities are. Every student ought to be spending a significant amount of his or her "time on task"

- listening for information and for internalizing the holistic patterns of the language;

- speaking in meaningful, interactive contexts;
- reading to acquire knowledge; and
- writing to express personal information and ideas.

In other words, when there is equity in the amount of instructional time spent on mechanical drills and language-use activities, there must also be equity in the time focused on message with that focused on form. When we discuss what students did on the weekend, it cannot simply be to review the past tense. If a student says that she or he studied, we are going to have to learn to "piggyback" questions to get to a discourse level: what, how long, where, with whom, why. As Snyder and DeSelms (24, p. 4) have said, "Most real communication does not take place between two people with 25 or more others listening, not to what is being said, but rather to how it is being said."

But while these are "band aid" solutions we are going to have to deal in some substantive way with Krashen's "learning/acquisition" hypothesis (12). As Stevick (25, p. 23) says:

> Over the centuries teachers have used countless methods and techniques. Most of the time, by whatever method, we have concentrated on trying to teach so that our students would learn. Acquisition has come—when it has come at all—as a desirable but incidental by-product of good teaching and good learning. Its recent identification as a separate process casts light on what we have been doing all along. This knowledge also opens up exciting new prospects for what we may do in the future. Now that we see the difference between learning and acquisition, we can balance them against each other and combine them so that each will promote the other.

While Krashen defines learning as formal classroom study and acquisition as the subconscious "picking up" of a language in the environment, Terrell (29, p. 225) helps teachers enormously in their efforts to "combine them so that each will promote the other" by taking the position that

> acquisition as a process is seen as a mixture of conscious and subconscious attempts at binding form and meaning and then accessing these forms for a communicative purpose. Learning exercises may in some cases aid the acquisition process for many students.

In early stages, students need natural communicative experiences

in order to bind meaning to structural and lexical form in their efforts to internalize the holistic patterns of the language as they progress. Through vicarious cultural experiences presented in the second-language classroom, students can "acquire" the language as if they were abroad.

Implicit in the "balancing" or combining of acquisition and learning in the classroom, however, is Krashen's "input" hypothesis (12), which holds that learners acquire language by listening to or reading materials slightly beyond their level of competence. As Terrell, (29, p. 223) says, "Learning is not acquisition, and it does not *become* acquisition without the necessary comprehensible input." Oller (19, p. 5) considers how "input" becomes "intake," evolving three hypotheses—a textuality, an expectancy, and an episode hypothesis—to lead to "pragmatic mapping," which he defines as "the systematic linking of discourse structures to the events of ordinary experience (and vice versa)." Deploring what he calls "unmotivated" texts, solely designed for the manipulation of structure with no regard for meaning, Oller calls for "motivated" texts, which are built around meaningful conflict, have a story line carried by stageable actions, and which respect the logic of experience. He argues (p. 12) that "foreign language teaching would be more successful if it incorporated principles of good story writing along with the benefits of sound linguistic analysis." But while Oller provides us with the kind of wherewithal that is needed for "comprehensible input," Terrell (29, p. 216) warns us that "comprehensible input" is only one of the necessary conditions for acquisition to take place; the other is "opportunities to access those bound forms to express ideas in meaningful contexts." *"Balancing" or "combining" learning and acquisition with skill-using and skill-getting should become an instructional goal.*

An increased emphasis on skill-using will have to bring with it a greater emphasis on grouping and student interaction. Nerenz and Knop (18, p. 52) found paired learning especially effective:

> Perhaps the best balance between the speech and engagement variables . . . is found during pair activities. While only a small number of formal or informal pair activities were observed, the ratio of student-to-teacher speech was the highest (8.44), more than double that observed for small groups. Moreover, high percentages of communicative and target language interactions were observed (88%, 82%), while engagement averaged 78 percent.

By contrast, when testing large groups, there was very high engagement (87%) and a large percentage of the target language was spoken (95%). However, those factors were offset by a high amount of teacher-talk (85%), a low amount of student-to-teacher talk (46%), and a large amount of repetitive speech (37%) (Nerenz and Knop, 18).

Realigning our instructional priorities to "balance" learning and acquisition, that is, skill-using, should ultimately have salutary effects on both motivation and retention. We may even find that the kind of error correction we do is dramatically changed because students will have an opportunity to "bind" and "access" forms in less inhibiting and frustrating ways.

## Eclectic Methodologies for the Future

Grammar-translation was the dominant philosophy for more than the first half of this century and several decades before that. It was "the one true way" despite the fact that it neither garnered public support nor motivated student interest. When the "audiolingual revolution" swept the country, it was the new "one true way," but the pace of change had so escalated that, despite the early public support and student interest, the new "one true way" lasted only a little more than a decade. The demise of audiolingualism taught the profession that if there was any absolute at all it was that one true ways would no longer serve. By the 1970s, the decade of "innovative overchoice" (Lafayette, 13), we were adjusting to methodological "working hypotheses" (Strasheim, 26) and by the 1980s Higgs declared "methodological eclecticism" a "logical imperative" (8, p. 8).

While "methodological eclecticism" may well be a "logical imperative" for the immediate future, we must never forget Finocchiaro's warning (6, p. 7) that while "our methods should be eclectic," they should *not* be "haphazard or random." What we have to adopt is what Patterson, Purkey, and Parker (21, p. 115) call "strategic planning": "A strategic plan is dynamic, and is constantly being monitored, interpreted, altered, improved, and, above all, implemented." Classroom teachers are going to have to experiment in an ongoing effort to find

those methods in "consonance with the teacher's personality, the students' learning styles and rhythms, and board of education or community demands" (Finocchiaro, 6, p. 8).

What we will, in all likelihood, find out is that, given different emphases and levels of competence at the various stages of the sequence, "different approaches may be appropriate" (Higgs, 8, p. 8). Certainly strategies like Total Physical Response[5] and the Natural Approach[6] are far more appropriate in the beginning level of instruction while other kinds of strategies for the "balancing" of learning and acquisition must be found for the other levels. In the process, clear focuses will be established at each level, although every facet will be handled. The end product will be a diversification of the levels at long last, with students assuming more and more responsibility for their learning and using the language as a vehicle for the expansion of knowledge and their personal horizons as they advance. In many ways, the manner in which we handle the "balancing" of learning and acquisition in the early levels is critical, for motivation and retention hinge upon our success at showing real student progress toward the attainment of proficiency in these stages.

## Conclusion

James (10, p. 3) has said, "Proficiency represents the basic principle upon which our profession has operated for centuries." In the 1980s the call is for the profession to bring its classroom practices into harmony with its goals and principles. We have most of the knowledge and resources needed. What remains to be seen is if we have the will to do what has to be done.

### Notes

1. See Pamela J. Myers, "Motivational Factors and Student Retention in School Foreign Language Programs," pp. 21–30 in David P. Benseler, ed., *Teaching the Basics in the Foreign Language Classroom: Options and Strategies*, Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1979).
2. For a fuller treatment of this approach to curriculum design, see Walter H. Bartz and Lorraine A. Strasheim, "Achieving Proficiency Goals through Competency Guidelines," pp. 55–67 in Barbara Snyder, ed., *Second-Language Acquisition: Preparing for Tomorrow*, Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1986).
3. There are two fine studies of teacher priorities and the utilization of class time: Peter A. Eddy,

"Present Status of Foreign Language Teaching: A Northeast Conference Survey," pp. 13–59 in Thomas H. Geno, ed., *Our Profession: Present Status and Future Directions* (Middlebury, VT: Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1980); and Anne Nerenz, "Utilizing Class Time in Foreign Language Instruction," pp. 78–89 in David P. Benseler, ed., *Teaching the Basics in the Foreign Language Classroom: Options and Strategies*, Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1979).

4. Wilga Rivers coined the terms "skill-getting" and "skill-using" in *A Practical Guide to the Teaching of French* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). They appear in her *Guides* to German and Spanish as well.
5. In James J. Asher's *Learning Another Language through Actions: The Complete Teacher's Guidebook* (Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc., 1982), there are 75 pages of classroom lessons, including discussions of how to expand basic structures, introduction of the future tense, and so on, all with a focus on developing listening comprehension.
6. The sections on oral communication development through acquisition activities and additional sources of input for acquisition and learning in Stephen D. Krashen's and Tracy D. Terrell's *The Natural Approach* (Hayward, CA: The Alemany Press, 1983), make the book an invaluable resource.

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